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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School for American Crafts
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS
CERAMICS

Fanciful Animals in Captivity
By
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Abstract

“Poetry [or Pottery] is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” –William Wordsworth

It is easy to romanticize the past. Driving past a dairy farm, reading animal noise books with a daughter, drawing a picture with a brother—moments that seem ordinary become more significant as time passes. Even difficult moments—sleepless nights, traffic jams, tantrums—soften and transform as they are “recollected in tranquility.”

Such everyday memories inspire my work with clay. Each object becomes a monument to moments in my personal narrative. At the same time I use elements of historical ceramics, relating to them through parody, pun, and craftsmanship. In this way tiny pieces from the life of ceramics help me tell the story of my own life.

In this thesis my feelings and memories are on display—like *Animals in Captivity*. The work is informed by spirit, and influenced both by personal history and historical ceramics. What makes it fanciful is the daily mystery of how, with time, the mundane becomes numinous in the kiln of the human heart.

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Introduction

Since I first started making pots, I have been interested in the history of ceramics. This has had a profound effect on my work. Coming from a liberal arts background, I was immediately taken with how ceramics (like other areas of study) spans across different cultures and people, and has the capacity to carry narrative and hold greater meaning than simply what it means to have a good pour from a pitcher or a comfortable handle and drinking lip on a cup. That is what makes the scholarly pursuit of being a ceramic maker so challenging—and, at the same time, inspiring. There is a tremendous learning curve when it comes to learning just the basics of making a functional object—things like the pour or the weight of a domestic object—but additionally, with each object there is a history and a relationship to a culture—to a way of life. Why can a pot made in England look like a pot made in Greece, or a pot made in Germany look like a pot made in North America? For me, there is a contingency to this phenomenon just as tangible and personal as a family tree.

To that end, the crux of being a maker for me is learning where in this massive family tree one sits. How can one produce “good” and “new” and “informed” work while paying homage to the history, and also trying to move past it? Can work be an embrace while at the same time being a denial? I think that, in art, there are not rules to follow (Duchamp showed us that). To make thoughtful work, a ceramic maker/ potter doesn’t necessarily need material specificity or a solid grasp of ceramic history. We don’t have to be anthropologists. However, for me, the relationship between the history of ceramics and the work I make is just too juicy to ignore. It gives the work context, and at the same time can work as a platform or story telling device to tell my own story through the work. It can allow work to evolve and inform. It is an endless labyrinth with a wealth of information which can inform my own work.

Body of Document

Part 1: Working through an idea (no matter how ridiculous) is better than letting the idea sit in your head

Artists are not born; they are made. I think most artists' work is directly tapped from the experiences they have gone through, the teachers they have had, and the work they look at. I am no exception.

I have a twin brother. Being a twin means that I have always shared a room, a birthday, and a restroom. Being brothers we had our fair share of arguments, but sharing never really was an issue. It was easy because he was always there, extreme propinquity! The thing we shared the most was drawing. We would spend hours drawing, sharing lines, riffing off each other's ideas. It was easy.

It was this relationship, I feel, that first got me so fascinated with the communal nature of functional objects. How a bowl could be for one or more people, or how a tea bowl could be shared in drinking ceremonies, or how a large jar could feel like another presence/ life force. It also made me feel kinship with the pots that had quick, visceral drawings—work like Buncheong ware from Korea and pots from North Devon England.

When I got to college, I had no idea what I wanted to do until I took my first philosophy class. I felt that I didn't really know anything of real interest, so I thought an entire study about the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge would fill the void. What was most captivating to me was the study of Ethics and how it related to Logic. It was what my undergraduate thesis was about. I was especially taken with Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean. It meant when one was faced with

an ethical challenge, the Mean was the most ethical choice. For instance, the virtue courage sat squarely between cowardice (as the deficiency) and rashness (as the excess).

I see the designing and making of ceramic objects similarly. Not only in the description or meaning the work takes on, but in its design. The weight (or visual weight of a sculpture), handle placement, drinking lip, and aesthetic all have a mean. However, what becomes fun is when you can play with the mean. Perhaps seeing the “morality” of making as a sliding scale that can be perceived as jarring or flashy (excess and deficiency). To begin asking questions about where things on a pot can go and why? An artist who does the very well is Mike Helke.

Mike is able to use the craftsmanship and elements of the historic vessel, vessels that most of us are familiar with, and produce comically exaggerated work that challenges the form and pour of a teapot or the silhouette of a pitcher. They are often so odd and altered that some of work develops a humor that makes me question, “Is this good work? I am not sure if I get this one,” but I think that is important. I think working through an idea (no matter how ridiculous) is better than



letting the idea sit in your head. I think that Mike Helke is able to take his work seriously, no matter how it might be portrayed by his audience. Working this way allows a maker to learn from past efforts.

After my obtaining my undergraduate degree, I moved to Rochester, New York. All I wanted was to continue learning the wheel and how to make a ‘good’ pot. I applied to RIT with my beginner pots, and was lucky to get into a position as resident at The School for American Crafts. It was during my time at the residency (and my time at graduate school) that I began copying and using historical pots as references, and from there developed a deep relationship with the history of ceramics. I would copy pitchers from England or carve a Buncheong-style carving. Some days I would try to make one thing from five different cultures.

After all that research, towards the end of my schooling I was most interested in the work that told a narrative, work that I felt had life; objects of function but with a purpose beyond comfort. I found myself relating to ceramics traditions like Han Dynasty spirit jars from China, Mexican candelabras, Tang dynasty horses, and Staffordshire ceramic figures from Europe.

These ceramic traditions were mostly based around ritualistic objects. Some were for



funerary traditions, like this three-tiered pottery lamp from a Han dynasty (206 b.c.-a.d. 220) tomb (which was believed to be vital to the soul's safe journey into the next life) or the multi-storied manor houses and watchtowers from the Han. I also became fascinated with the Tang dynasty ware that was purposed for tombs.

I think my interest in these histories as they relate to culture, place, luxury, death, and celebration is what led to my interest in artists like Liz Quackenbush and Steven Young Lee. Both of these artists use the histories that I am interested in, and question how the objects and techniques of the past can be compared to their own lives. Liz tries to bridge the gap between fine china and the humble pot, and creates objects that have almost a cosmic aesthetic. Steven Young Lee questions place, identity, and failure in tandem with intent, while using historic ware as parody to challenge his own craftsmanship. It is this combination of strict craftsmanship and improvisation that really inspires me.

Liz Quackenbush



Steven Young Lee



Part 2: Evolution and then...

Throughout my time at RIT, my work has evolved and changed dramatically. I came in as a resident not really knowing anything about clay. I would carve my bottom-heavy vessels, with imagery informed with limited historic elements. At the beginning it was all about decoration, and then about FUNCTION!



After my residency, I probably spent my entire first year of graduate school working on pitchers. I wanted to make the ‘perfect’ weight, height, and pour. I was also looking at a lot of Phil Rogers pots. I wanted my work to be earthy, quiet, and approachable. Using wood ash glazes and firing to cone 11 worked for me (for a short time). It was at this point that I developed the following artist’s statement:

For me the success, the full meaning, of a piece depends on how well it achieves a connection between its maker and its owner.

For the artist the crux is tactile experience, the shaping and carving born of a moment’s intuition. A thought too fleeting for words becomes, after the firing, the concrete expression of that thought.

The owner connects with that first act of creation when she sees and touches the piece; she completes its meaning in the ways she integrates the piece into her daily life.

I was only really thinking about my objects as domesticated work. This dogmatic ideology that I made for myself made me believe that this was ‘ethical,’ or somehow ‘right.’ I would continue this belief system though the summer of that year (2017), where I learned how to make large Onggi Pots with Adam Field in Long Beach California. This trip, which was hugely important to the work I am making now,



perpetuated my belief that a pot needs to be usable. Having learned from traditional Korean Onggi makers, Adam had very strict parameters for what an Onggi pot was supposed to do and look like. The entire form was broken down into a ratio.

At the start of my 2nd year of graduate school, I started to get into cone 6 soda firing. At this time, I was starting to realize that I needed to start developing a body of work that had a personal voice. As I thought about this, I realized that all I had been doing over the course of the past two years was copying pottery from the past, without really thinking about my own experiences or my own voice. I then began practicing making the large pots I



learned about over the summer, while also attempting to develop my own artistic voice. Thus started the series of heads on top of large soda fired pots. I thought, “Finally here it is, my Voice.” However, this feeling of fulfillment would pass pretty quickly.

Making the heads began to make me think of the pots as more than objects of function. They were able to interact with each other and began to make me think about presence, and how a pot could be related to the body. It wasn't until Paul Sacaridiz, director of Haystack craft school, came to RIT that I had a moment that would set my thesis into motion. When Paul and I spoke about my work, he was most charmed by the face jar that had small candle holders on the side. He



said, “If you build off of this, you will be fine.” With this advice I started an exploration of candelabras and the addition sculptural elements to my work, which was the beginning to my unearthing of ideas for my thesis exhibition.



What was still holding me back at this point was the soda firing. I had a surface that I was happy with. I had the earthy colors that I was searching for in the beginning of my exploration in ceramics, but it was keeping me from using color. I felt that color was missing so to distance myself from the colorless, I needed to stop firing soda. So, when the Spring semester started, I made some earthenware and started making and firing at cone 04. The image to the right was one of the first iterations of this body of work.



Part 3: The Solution (Body of Work)

I was making the big work, but it wasn't until making this pot that I started to add birds and flowers. I was thinking of concept and colors. For probably the first time, I was thinking about the combination of matte and gloss in making glazes. Everything began to open up

artistically and mentally while making and glazing this pot. I was excited and wanted to get it into the kiln as quickly as possible, so I used it as a giant test tile. All the glazes on this pot were untested.

As I reflect upon this pot, I think back to the goals of my original proposal and I think I was finally starting to achieve what I set out to do. I wanted to make ‘good’ work that used history and told a narrative about me and my relationship with clay and ceramic history. This pot opened the gates to make room for me to reflect upon my own experiences. And out popped memories, relationships, and new questions. And from this came a body of work for my show.



Driving Past a Vermont Dairy Farm

This piece is from a memory of driving past a dairy farm. Emma (my wife) and I were on our way to a camping trip. This is the largest piece for the thesis show.

While making this piece, I was thinking about that day. There were windmills in the distance, and a warm gentle breeze blowing through the cracked window of the car. The road is depicted by the line around the belly of the pot, and the windmills are represented through the



attachments to the side. On top of the lid is a Staffordshire cow holding up houses (as well as a bird that decided to land there). The scene is a bit fantastical, given the fact that the cow and bird are much larger than the building sandwiched between the two.

As I worked on this piece, I thought about life on the farm and the memories that are contained there. Although beautiful, there could potentially be a dark underbelly to the seemingly pleasant farm. There could be abuse of livestock. The farm could have been a front for a drug cartel. Perhaps the farmer murdered his partner in the 1980's and buried her on the property, providing fertilizer for the tall grass that the cows were grazing on. That is where the dark red glaze comes in. The intention was to depict a subtle horror scene, hidden behind something seemingly pleasant.



Oh Hallstatt

Oh, Hallstatt is a piece about a town in Austria. As part of my undergraduate program, I went to Austria for a few weeks. The trip was filled with classical music, opera, and tours of the set of the film *The Sound of Music* (which really isn't Austrian culture). What stuck out to me the most from this trip was the town of Hallstatt. The town is in a deep valley, pressed between snowy cliffs. In front of the town lies a body of fresh water, which looks completely untouched by man.



I use blue on the pot to depict the water, and images of flies connected to finger-swiped lines to show the insects dancing in and out of the tall grass surrounding the town. On the lid is my interpretation of the town of Hallstatt. Houses are sitting on top of blue glaze, complete with a Catholic Church—a sketch of my memory of the place. Sitting on top of the houses are a pile of yellow birds. This is a reference to a small shop in the middle of Hallstatt, which sold little figures of yellow birds. I purchased one of them and gave it to my sister. This was the only trinket that I purchased in Hallstatt, and it therefore influences how I remember the town. In my memory, the birds are much larger than they were in real life—hence the reason why they are so much larger than the town itself in my depiction of the place. There is a gold crown on top of the highest bird, an homage to the monarchy that Austria used to be.



Perching Chickadees (Perched Chickadees)

This large jar has to do with how I think about Tang Dynasty ware. The Tang ware was typically green, tan (yellow), white, and occasionally blue. The colors and patterns on the lead-glazed pots came from a time when China was spreading its empire. I associate the ware (especially the horses) with death and the afterlife, because most of the Tang Dynasty ware in museums were discovered in tombs.

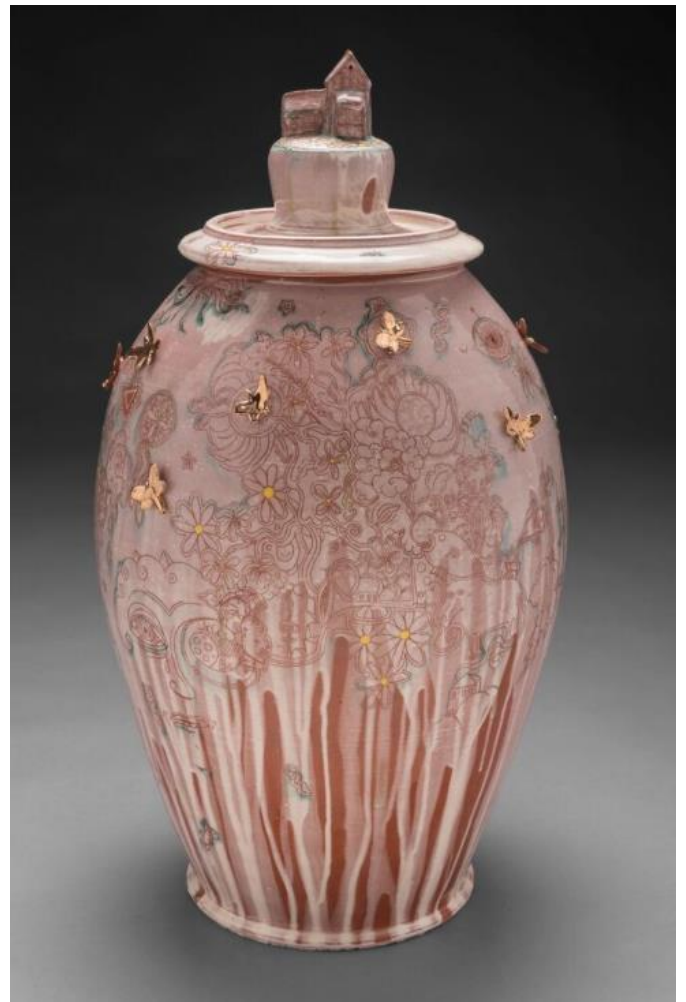


With that in mind, I started to think of the Chickadees in relationship this idea of death and afterlife. I decided to decorate this pot with Tang colors, in a striped pattern resembling a fumigation tent draped over a home. A fumigation is all about the killing of pests, so that a family can comfortably live in a house. Being under the tent (while the house is being fumigated) is like being in a protected tomb—and the objects in the home, if only for a short moment, become associated with the creatures dying inside the house—like the Tang horses in the tombs.

Sugar Mountain

This pot is about me and my twin brother, and our childhood in Hellertown, Pennsylvania. When we were children, we would draw together. We did this all the way up through high school. It is something that we bonded over. The name comes from the Neil Young song, *Sugar Mountain*. In the song, Neil sings about how everything is easier and more pleasant in childhood (compared to adulthood). He describes the childhood home as a place with candy and balloons—a place where your parents take care of you. But, as Neil puts it, “you can’t be twenty on Sugar Mountain”.

I moved and left for college, and my brother stayed in Hellertown. We try to see each other when



we can, but it will never be what it was. But that is just how life is—things change as you grow up. This pot about going back in time and returning to a time when we were children, just drawing on a piece of paper. That is how the images on this pot were produced. As we drew, we would switch places every fifteen to twenty minutes, adding to the stray line left in the



image. I would draw the things I was exposed to (like historical elements of ceramics), while my brother would draw what he knows as a tree trimmer and tattoo enthusiast, plants and images from the tattoos on his body.

On top of the finial is a model of our childhood home in Hellertown. All the rooms are labeled—our childhood room, our parents’ room, and our sister’s room. The gold butterflies give the piece life. Meanwhile, each image is haloed in a blue green outline, giving our images a ghostly haze. This represents that, even though we are recreating our past by drawing together, it is still in the past—a ghost of what we used to do as children on Sugar Mountain.

Copper Head

Copper head is about an experience that my brother and I had when we were children. It was the first time that we went sailing on our own, and we had just watched a movie about how snakes could attack at any moment—even in the water. We were frightened for the entire trip, and we didn’t know how to get back to shore because the wind had changed directions.

The flowers and the birds give the impression that in this moment on the boat, there was growth and life. Which, looking back, is true. We were being pushed out of the nest, confronted with nature and the elements. The image on the back of the pot is what we both felt at the time of the trip. Fear of being alone. That, at any moment, a snake could come up from the briny depths of the Peconic bay and swallow our tiny boat whole.

On this pot there is a copper lid that works as a visual pun (a Copperhead snake/a Copper-headed pot) and a gold lustered bird with imagery reminiscent of the drawings that my brother and I would make as children. There are also traditional Onggi markings that are being re-interpreted as a sky, a horizon, and an ocean in order to create the scene.



32 Ptarmigans and Golden

Warblers

Although both these pieces are separate, they are meant to inform each other. The 32 Ptarmigans are porcelain birds that are scattered all around the gallery, working as a tool to encourage people to see the show



from different perspectives. They are cash and carry so that, as they start to disappear, the audience has to look harder to find one. There are 32 of them, to commemorate my final year of graduate school.

In contrast to the Ptarmigans, the Golden Warblers are earthenware—a cheaper and more accessible clay—cloaked in gold luster drawings taken from my sketch book. They do two things. They are placed directly under the title of the show (on the wall of the gallery) in bright lights,



which is in direct contrast to the porcelain Ptarmigans. The Golden Warblers are front and center, meant to be noticed, while the Ptarmigans are hiding. This piece is meant to question the value of material. The Warblers also serve as a way to compare big work and small. Most of the

show is large work, and the Warblers are meant to function as a device to simulate a larger scale for the pots, and a smaller scale for the birds themselves.

Ghost



Ghost is a candelabra piece that is meant to perpetuate a romantic ideology throughout the show. The candelabra sits, almost like a plant growing from the top of the pot.

What I find interesting about lighting a candle is that it is normally meant to commemorate a moment. Whether for a fancy dinner or a religious ceremony, a candle can symbolize life and presence while lit, and instantly represent the end of something when



extinguished. Beginning and end. Beginning and End.

This piece is called Ghost because, if you look hard enough, there is a one little ghost hiding among the flowers. Another reason for the title is, when the when the candles are blown out, it looks like the spirits are leaving the piece. It looks as if a weight has been lifted, and all the life is floating away and disappearing into nothing. For the most part, I find this piece to be large, detailed and confronting. But with the addition of the candles, at the same time, it can be weightless.

Harvest Jug in Spaghetti Brain Basin

This piece is about pun, parody, popular culture, and a short stint as a boy scout. The Harvest jug is famously made in North Devon, England. They were made for harvest time. This comes from a fall tradition, where people of the area would come together to partake in ales or rich ciders from large communal pitchers (often earthenware with sgraffito designs). Largely due to the prevalence of zombies in popular culture, for this piece, I wanted to re-interpret “harvest” to the harvesting of brains to suggest a zombie theme.

I associate Zombies with Halloween. Every time I think of the holiday, I think of a boy scout dinner that I went to in 1999. There was a haunted house. Some of the parents wore costumes and served punch to the troop. At the end of haunted house, we were led into a dark room where we put our hands into a bowl of spaghetti and were told that it was brains! So, in keeping with the theme, I decided put spaghetti in the bottom of the basin. A Harvest Jug in Spaghetti Brain Basin is definitely one of the odder pieces in the show.



For Esmé with Love (For Emma)

This piece represents both the recent past and my future. This was the first piece that started off this body of work, and I find it to be one of the more successful ones. The first title, For Esmé Love, is based on the title of a short story written by J.D. Salinger: For Esmé with Love and Squalor. For Esmé is a story about an intelligent young girl's conversation and subsequent relationship with an American soldier in WWII. My wife Emma and I fell in love with the story and decided to name our daughter Esmé after it. I left out "squalor" because so far it has been only love.

The original intention was to commemorate the first year of my daughter's life. The flowers are meant to speak to all the growing she has done over the past year, and the life she has given us so far. The pot functions similarly to a large birthday cake with one candle at the top, signifying her first year of life. On the side of the pot is her height chart for each month of her first year, representing the domesticity of the object and of our home.

But there was something missing from the concept. I tried



to figure out who this pot was really for, and I came to realize that while it is about Esmé it is really For Emma. She was the reason that I was able to go to graduate school, and I will be forever grateful.

The addition of “For Emma” to the title is loosely based on Bon Iver’s album, ‘For Emma Forever ago’. The album is musician Justin Vernon’s reflection on life after having broken up with his girlfriend. He went to a cabin, lived as a recluse, and wrote the Grammy winning album. It is the *emotion recollected in tranquility* that produced his work. It is the same act that produced this piece, all the other work in this show, and the work that I will make in the future.

Conclusion

While I was installing the show, I started to think of the work as the chronology of my life. The pieces started to speak to one another in ways that I did not expect prior to installation. In the beginning, I wanted the basic premise of my thesis to be work that talked about the history of ceramics while also talking about my own personal narrative, and I think that is this work does that. Each of the pieces in the show has a relationship to history from English, Korean, and Chinese ceramics while also relating to personal stories of family and experiences garnished with popular culture from music and literature. All are recollected upon making and showing the objects

I also wanted to know where I fit in the family tree of ceramics, and that is hard to answer. Maybe the work that I am making now doesn’t fit into the same family tree I initially thought I was a part of. I now am beginning to think about my work as an outside observer to the world of ceramics. The work has become more atomic and sculptural. The work can wear costumes of other pots, but underneath is something different. Perhaps it is the relationship to

something familiar links us, but it is the interpretation of the familiar things that makes us individuals. It becomes Poetry (pottery), Art, that is “*the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.*” (William Wordsworth)

As I look at the work in its exhibition, I don't feel done. I think that this body of work can be pushed even more. What seemed ambitious to me while I was making it now feels safe. Perhaps I will always feel that way, even with the work I haven't made yet. For me, what is driving me creatively now is the recollection of work that I made in the past. I plan to continue to try to make it better upon reflection, while continuously learning from all the new fanciful animals that I encounter.

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